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ABSTRACT

Research was conducted using an ethnographic method within a cultural reproduction framework to examine what it means to young women to be office education students in a comprehensive urban high school, and how those meanings are reproduced. The analysis is based on a year-long field study of a cooperative office education program in a midwestern urban high school, a vocational program that combines schooling and on-the-job training. The data were collected during the 1980-81 school year using participant observation at the school and worksites, formal and informal interviewing, and examination of curricular materials and school records. Findings were that, contrary to the literature, students did not view themselves as academic failures, did not dislike school, and did not have office career aspirations. Rather, enrollment in the program meant that the students were testing the world of office work, developing employable skills as something to fall back on, and accommodating themselves to the best and most likely wage labor options for women. The analysis also indicated that the meaning of work and career aspirations are misconceived as individual psychological variables. Rather, they arise from the cultural context, within which these students accept and reproduce the meaning of traditional sex roles in their vocational choice. (KC)

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OFFICE EDUCATION STUDENTS AND THE MEANING OF WORK

by

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Introduction

The research reported here utilizes ethnographic methodology within a cultural reporduction framework to examine what it means to young women to be office education students in a comprehensive urban high school, and how those meanings are reproduced.

I will first briefly discuss the significance of the topic and summarize the theory and methodology employed. I will then discuss what being an office eudcation student did not mean to the students, what it did mean, what the processes of meaning construction were for them, and finally, how cultural reproduction theory informed my analysis.

My decision to study vocational preparation for office work was influenced by the realization that typical workers in the United States are clerks, the vast majority of whom are women, and that clerks rank among the most dissatisfied of workers in this country (Work in America, 1973; Blaxall and Reagan, 1976). Why, then, would students consciously prepare themselves to become office workers? That question became the starting point of an inquiry into the lives of a specific group of high school students, into the type of education or training they receive for office jobs, and into the nature of those jobs themselves.

The study focused on the group of high school seniors who had selected a cooperative office occupations program, a program that I shall often refer to by the acronyn COOP (pronounced co-op). Since cooperative education gives students substantial on-the-job training and often provides entry to post-school jobs, it seemed the best vehicle to analyze the school-to-work transition.

The data for the analysis were collected during the 1980-81 school year. The site was a comprehensive, urban, primarily working class high school, which I will call Woodrow High, in a mid-western city. I was present at Woodrow from September through June on approximately half the school days, scattered throughout the year. Three related techniques were utilized to collect the data: participant observation in the school and at work (fourteen sites in all); formal and informal interviewing of significant subjects throughout the year (e.g. teachers, students, supervisors, alumnae and co-workers); and analysis of curricular materials and other related documents.

Unlike most educational programs, which take place primarily within school buildings, cooperative education alternates work experience with school experience. Students are assisted in finding career-related jobs and are to receive on-the-job, as well as classroom, training. The implicit rationale of the program is that the worksite is a valuable source of learning and should be utilized as an educational tool. The stated expectation is that cooperative education will help students identify their career objectives, that this identification will lead to appropriate training in attitudes, skills and knowledge, and that the training will bring about career results. These careers are then supposed to create a better community, a community that will "experience a productive growth of its citizens, schools and businesses."

The cooperative office education program at Woodrow High was organized in a fairly typical manner. During their senior year, students who selected the program attended classes in the morning and worked from three to four and a half hours in the afternoon, for which they received both one school credit and pay. The students were supposed to carry three morning classes in addition to the "related" office education class, the class specifically designed to relate to their afternoon work experience. This class was scheduled to meet five times a week for forty minutes each day. Students would often miss class, excused or not, but would report for work that afternoon. Four times a year, the teacher (referred to hereon as Mrs. Lewis) met with each supervisor for a student evaluation session. Within a day or two, Mrs. Lewis would then meet with each student in her private office to discuss the evaluation.

In addition to the numerous interviews I conducted with Mrs. Lewis, I interviewed each of the sixteen students enrolled in COOP that year and seventeen of the COOP alumnae. My goals for the alumnae interviews were threefold: to obtain more information on family backgrounds and influences, since I had no direct contact with parents; to collect reflective accounts of their decision to take and their experiences within cooperative office education; and to obtain information on work life and perspectives after high school. I anticipated that these accounts would both confirm and elaborate upon the information I was gathering from my work within the school, and this expectation was realized.

The basic theoretical perspective underlying the study is one of social and cultural reproduction, one in which people actively engage their institutional and cultural surroundings to make choices, create meaning and ultimately give shape to their everyday lives. These surroundings are envisioned as Althusser's structured totality, in which various domains are in 'relative autonomy' to one another and in which 'reciprocal action' is possible (Althusser 1971: 135). In Burawoy's words, "the defining features of a structured totality... are the 'relative autonomy' of its parts and their mutual determination through the conditions of each other's reporduction...." (1978: 308).

I am not positing the functionalist equivalent of a smoothly operating social system wherein each part and each person serves the needs of the whole. "Rather than a functional coherence where all things work relatively smoothly to maintain a basically unchanging social order....where order is assumed and deviance from that order is problematic" (Apple, 1982: 14), this version of a structured totality envisions contradictions, conflicts and changes within and between levels so that the production of, say, a new generation of workers is never merely a question of teaching the appropriate dispositions and norms, as it is, for instance, in the work of Parsons (1959).

Instead, what I propose in this analysis is that the concept of culture is well-suited to avoid the pitfalls of a functionalist & deterministic perspective. It provides room for the expression of human power and subjectivity while not falling victim to what Bourdieu refers to as the problem of social psychology, interactionism and ethnomethodology: the tendency to ignore social structure and reduce interpersonal relations to individual relations (1977: 81).

I take Richard Johnson's view that culture is

> the common sense or way of life of a particular class, group or social category, the complex of ideologies that are actually adopted as moral preferences or principles of life (Johnson, 1979: 234).

This stress on adopted emphasizes the lived, experiential, practical nature of the concept. Culture signifies an active participation in and creation of one's on-going way of life and meaning-making, not a passive reception of prescribed norms. It is not free-floating, but is given shape by the material conditions from which it arises (McRobbie, 1978: 97).

Social actors, however, need not (and perhaps cannot) be fully aware of the elements of their culture. Common sense is not always coherent and is seldom a systematic attempt to consciously understand the meaning of one's life. Culture is not primarily cognitive; it is found more in symbolic and behavioral than in verbal forms.

This point emerges over and over in the literature. Murdock and McCron (1975: 203) state that "consciousness can be read not only in verbalization but in the way it is objectified and expressed through other forms of social and cultural action." Kitwood, a social psychologist, says that something may be significant, but so much part of the 'taken for granted' world that it is never mentioned in the course of an interview (1980: 116).

Therefore, any analysis of meaning must attend not only to verbal, but to symbolic and behavioral manifestations as well. An understanding of what it means to be a student preparing for office work is best attained by first eliminating certain possibilities.

The Meaning of Office Education

There are common sense notions, supported in part by the scholarly literature, about why a high school student would be in an intensive office education program, where every afternoon of her senior year was spent away from the school, working in an office setting. Some of these notions are

-- that the students were academic failures, capable only of non-intellectual work
-- that the students disliked school, so chose a course that would remove them from the school site
-- that the students had office career aspirations.

My research revealed, however, that none of these characterizations were true.

Students in the COOP class had a wide ability and academic interest range. Mrs. Lewis reported that she often had that year's valedictorian or salutatorian in her class and that one of the COOP students received a four year accounting scholarship and passed all parts of her CPA exam on the first try.

Though certainly not all, enough students from the COOP class took academic classes, were members of the National Honor Society, had GPA's over 3.0, scored in the top quartile on national standardized tests, and planned to go to college to make them virtually indistinguishable from their female counterparts at Woodrow. The students had widely diverse ability and achievement levels. Many took college preparatory classes concurrent with their business classes. They were clearly not in the COOP program because they thought they were incapable of succeeding in the academic curriculum.

Nor did the students enroll in the COOP as a way of getting out of school in the afternoon, as one of Woodrow's teachers suggested to me. A few of my interviewees did say things like

> I guess I decided to take COOP because I thought it was better than going to school. I would rather work than go to school. The only classes I ever liked were office and gym....I just didn't like school.

But even for them, leaving school was never a decisive factor; it took the form more of an initial impression, meaning or image, rather than a significant part of their decision making process. Moreover, a number of the students who enrolled in the class liked being in school and were actively involved in extracurricular activities. Katrina typifies this group of students:

> I never thought too much about taking COOP my senior year because I liked school, was involved in cheerleading, and didn't think I wanted to leave at noon my entire senior year. But I did want a job...

Besides, Woodrow offered much easier ways of leaving school. Students did not have to remain in the school building if they did not have class and, since only 20 credits were needed to graduate, students could accumulate a number of free periods by their senior year. Skipping class was also a definite possibility and, as was evident from the information gathered during fieldwork, students were frequently able to use this means of leaving school without jeopardizing course credit or incurring other forms of reprisals. As one of the students in the class commented:

> Getting out of school early doesn't really make that much difference because you just have to go to work.

If neither low achievement nor an oppositional school culture characterized the COOP students, I still expected "office career" aspirations to distinguish them. After all, the official state guidelines for student selection into the program said that "all students enrolled in the COOP must have a clearly defined career goal" that falls within the broad categories of office occupation (e.g. accounting, computing, data processing, general clerical, secretarial, typing). But this, too, proved to be a false assumption. Only one third of my interviewees said they took COOP because they wanted to go into office work. This group of students said things like:

> I knew I wanted to be a secretary since I was about fourteen. When I was little I played nurse, but I can't stand the sight of blood. I really like typing and bookkeeping.

> I always liked typing. It was my favorite. I could sit and keep going for hours.

> I always knew I wanted to work in an office. I guess when I was little and walked into offices it always looked real interesting and I thought I would like to do that.... And I liked to type.

But most of the students in the cooperative office education class did not have a clear idea of what they would be doing at the year's end. Contrary to the literature, career aspirations do not appear to be stable at an early age, at least not in this stratum of young women. In fact, the students seemed to have only a vague and nebulous awareness of what different jobs entailed and the steps one would have to take to enter a specific line of work.

Kris, for instance, originally talked about going into beautician work, until she realized the year long training program was eight hours a day, six days a week. A relative also discouraged her by remarking that beauticians had to "put up with a lot" from customers. Dorothy, encouraged by her father, was planning to be a teacher. But during the course of her senior year, her father died, she became increasingly discontent with school, and she decided that teachers did not make that much money anyway. Katrina and Donna also planned to teach; Evelyn was considering commerical art; Maureen wanted to get a bachelor's degree and pursue a career in science; Dana and Cynthia were considering being flight attendants, and Janie a travel agent. These students obviously did not meet the state's guidelines of having "clearly defined" office career goals.

Clearly then, being a cooperative office education student did not carry the meaning of "this is the best I can do, given my limited ability." The COOP students did not view themselves as failures; they did not blame themselves for failing to achieve more education or a better job. Neither did it carry the meaning of school opposition and a rejection of formal education, nor a firm sense of a career.

What then <u>did</u> being an office education student mean to this group of young women?

It meant <u>testing</u> office work to see if it were an acceptable mode of employment, developing employable skills and references as either something to fall back on or as a stepping stone to something else, and accommodating themselves to the best and most likely options within the world of wage labor.

Students who took COOP as a test to determine whether office work was the type of employment they wanted to pursue after high school said things like:

> My mother recommended that I take some business classes while I was in high school. She said these would be good skills to develop and that I would see if I would like that work. So I started taking typing, shorthand, bookkeeping, the office procedures class, machine calc, and then the COOP class. I thought it would be a good way of finding out if I liked office work.

> I thought I would take COOP to see if I liked that kind of work.

> I have no idea why I took COOP. I didn't know what I wanted to do after high school so I guess I took it on a trial basis. I figure if I didn't like it I could always switch.

There was a similar group of students who were uncertain about whether or not they would like office-work, but these students, by contrast, tended to be consciously considering an alternative to office-work:

> In high school I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn't know what area I wanted to go into. So I took things like bookkeeping, typing, modern office and the COOP class because I thought these would be good background for getting a summer job or a part-time job while going to college. Or -- if all else failed -- it would be something to fall back on.

> My mother encouraged me to take business courses. She said that if, God forbid, anything should happen that I couldn't get another type of job, a secretary's job would be good to get into. She also said I might even be able to use it when I'm in college typing my own term papers, or maybe getting a part-time job in an office typing -- to help with tuition.

As these comments indicate, the COOP students' parents were often actively involved in helping their daughters plan for the future. These parents did not view office work as something to aspire to; rather they wanted their daughters to have a reasonable and workable alternative if other options did not materialize. One father, for example, who worked in the city's sanitation department and put his older daughter through a bachelor's degree in library science only to see her end up as a sales clerk in a local department store because of the flooded job market, strongly encouraged his younger daughter to enroll in COOP. When, as a sophomore, Joan showed interest in typing, her father bought her a brand new typewriter:

> My dad kept pushing it; he really wanted me to get into it. He said there would always be a job out there for someone with good secretarial skills.

For this type of student, the meaning of COOP was embedded in preparation for a future in which office skills could safeguard them from the need to accept less desirable employment.

But, most fundamentally, enrollment in COOP represented a sensible accommodation to the students' future possibilities and probabilities as they and their parents saw it. Even though a few women who had gone through the COOP program had attained or were preparing for jobs like accounting or engineering which clearly crossed traditional class and gender lines, for the vast majority such jobs rarely occurred to them or if they did were spoken of as passing thoughts or childhood fantasies.

Mary Jo, for example, explained how she had wanted to be an archeologist when she was in the eighth grade, how she had loved to watch accounts of digs in various parts of the world. But even at fourteen years of age she knew that was an impractical fantasy. She knew she had to get on with her life: to settle down, get a job, prepare for marriage and a family. So she planned to go to the community college after high school for a degree as an accountant clerk. When I asked why she had decided on a two rather than four year degree she responded,

> Why should I waste my time in school? I'd rather get going right away and get it over with.

Mary Jo said she had this old fashioned idea of raising a couple of children and working part-time.

Similarly, Marian, a graduate of the program, had once seriously entertained thoughts of being a gynecologist. She even sought out an office job in a health insurance company because it was related to the medical field. This student, however, had started going steady at sixteen, upon high school graduation had moved in with her boyfriend, and, at the time of our interview, was setting a date for their wedding. She said that if she had had the money and had not met Chuck she probably would have gone to medical school. She was, however, supporting his pursuit of higher education.

Even the most career-oriented of the women I spoke to defined her future by very distinct and traditional gender relations. In discussing her career, Kathryn, a 1980 graduate and an accounting student at a major university, said

> I want to be independent for my own satisfaction, so I can prove to myself that I can do it... so no one has to take care of me.

She went on, however, to explain that only if she remained single would she ever attempt to be a CPA, an auditor, or the president of a credit union. That type of work, she said, was too stressful to have other responsibilities as well. Since she definitely wanted a family she would probably never hold those jobs, but said she would instead look for an accountant's job at a small business or credit union which would be a good job and good salary "for a woman."

The other range of jobs students rarely spoke of or spurned when I questioned them about those jobs directly were things like factory work, maid work or restaurant work. While a number of them had mothers who had been employed in these occupations at least part-time, none of the COOP students could imagine themselves working in those areas. Office work was perceived as definitely superior. Students spoke of these other jobs as leading nowhere, undesirable places to work, or jobs you could not take pride in. One student who had worked for a while in a restaurant used the word disgusting when describing it and asked how I would like to clean up after other people. Another student, who worked in a factory job for three weeks said she did not last there because the work was so boring. She stood six hours at a time putting sausage in boxes that came down an assembly line. "If you got tired of putting sausage in," she said, "you could switch off with someone on cheese."

Factory jobs or mechanic jobs were also often ruled out on the basis of gender definitions. These jobs were definitely considered "for men only" since they made it impossible for women to maintain their feminie appearance:

> I would never be a mechanic. You get messy.
>
> I don't want muscles or to get dirty. I still want to be pampered. I'm not into all that liberated stuff.
>
> I can't imagine myself getting my hands all gooey, being sweaty and dirty all the time.
>
> I wouldn't want to work in a garage -- to be a mechanic. I wouldn't want to come home greasy.

The one job many of the students did mention as being very desirable, the one job they would have gone into had the market not been flooded and if remuneration for their work had been more adequate, considering the training and work entailed, was teaching -- mostly elementary and pre-school -- traditionally considered as much a female occupation as is office work. Louise, for instance, who was the valedictorian of her graduating class, was dissuaded by her mother from going into child care:

> I was very interested in working with little children. I always did a lot of babysitting and thought I would like to get into child care. But my mother said that day care centers didn't pay very well. Even if you owned one you probably wouldn't make very much. So she recommended that I take business classes while I was still in high school to see if I liked that area.

Dorothy, on the other hand, resisted her father's desire that she be the first in her family to obtain a college degree because, as she put it, "people are convincing me that teaching's not a good field to go into."

Even those students who were planning to get teaching or other four year degrees knew their college diploma might not necessarily get them a job in their area of preparation. Office skills, again, became that sensible safeguard against unemployment or employment in even less desirable positions. Office preparation was a sensible accommodation to a work world that was limited either by views of what was appropriate or desirable for a woman, or what was possible for a woman. Donna, for example, decided not to get a degree in business because in her words,

> I found out that if I would major in a business field I probably wouldn't get a much better job than what I've got right now.

As evidence for her contention Donna gave two examples. One was a magazine article she had recently read in which the author wrote of her experience trying to get a business job in New York City. She had an M.B.A. and all she could find was the lowest of secretarial positions. The other bit of evidence came from her own perceptions of the job structure at F & M Savings and Loan Association, her place of work as a COOP student, where she said, "it seems like the men are the ones who are going to get the higher positions." Donna knew these men had a lot of training and education, but still could not determine how they got where they were because she presumes "even the President of a big corporation" has to start out at the bottom just like everyone else. Her dilemma was that she never saw any men in positions at the bottom. The situation of seeing no women in the middle or top positions, having the career ladder totally obscure to her, and reading about women who do not make it even when they have the credentials was enough to eliminate business management as a possible career choice for Donna.

So the students who enroll in the program do not do so primarily because they "always wanted to be secretaries," but because other possibilities either seem worse or might not materialize. Women enter office jobs not because of aspirations, motivations, and intensive vocational preparation as high school students, but because, given culturally accepted standards and the availability of jobs, office work is regarded as respectable employment "for a woman."

The import of that last statement is further illuminated by the students explanations of the sexual division of labor, and specifically, of the absence of boys from office education classes. Some students saw the sexual division of labor as a natural division, some as a social division, and some seemed unable to distinguish between the two.

> Office work is mostly for women because it's typing and a lot of guys don't like to type. Filing and receptionist, that's more for girls too, becuase that's secretary work and girls are secretaries, you know.
>
> Kris '81

> I guess there aren't any boys in the class because the role of secretary has almost always been all women. Probably because its traditional for the man to be the boss.
>
> Katrina '81

> Women shouldn't do construction work. Men are stronger and it's just the way it should be. Secretary jobs are probably for women mostly. That's just the way things are.
>
> Terri '81

> Boys don't take the class because boys aren't secretaries. They're more into manual labor. That's just today's society. Men don't sit and push pencils. Being a secretary is a girl's job.
>
> Marion '80

> A guy should be the boss. I can't see a lady telling a guy what to do. He'd probably be bigger than her.... I'm not used to a lady boss. I mean, you don't see it on television. There a man is always the boss. And that's just the way I think it should be. Sure, there could be a lady doing Robert's job, but that wouldn't be right.
>
> Cynthia '81

What "is" often became equated with what "should be" and, surprisingly enough, as late as 1981 many of these eighteen to twenty year olds had not seriously considered alternatives. In fact, the ideology of the sexual division of labor remained so strong that many of the students continued to advance arguments that their everyday experiences clearly contradicted (e.g. seeing men who pushed pencils, having women as bosses).

When students elaborated on the reasons why men did not or should not do women's work and why women did not or should not do men's work, a striking contrast could be heard. Generally using euphemistic language they explained that men would be considered gay if they ventured into what was traditionally regarded as women's work.

> I guess there weren't any boys in the class because they have the idea that it's for secretaries and they think boys aren't secretaries. I guess they think a lot of people might get the wrong idea.
>
> Jessica '80

> I really can't picture a man doing a woman's job. My uncle is a nurse, but he's like this (she made a limp wrist). That's why it would be hard for guys to have a woman's job. Because it's considered delicate and people might think they're gay.
>
> Debbie '80

> Guys aren't cheerleaders because they think it's too faggy.
>
> Kathryn '80

> I guess guys don't take something like the cooperative office class because they don't think it's right for them. They think they'd be laughed at -- wow, what a weirdo!
>
> Cynthia '81

> It's only in big cities that guys are secretaries; because they're able to get lost or hide more there.
>
> Doris '81

Doris went on to confirm my interpretation of her statement: if men did office work it meant they were gay; and if they were gay they would naturally want to hide their identity.

On the other hand, the young women who thought that the sexual division of labor should be maintained explained that women who were after men's jobs were trying to be like men or trying to prove their (mistaken) equality.

> I don't think ladies should be police or firemen either. They're just trying to show the guys they can do it and have the ability
>
> Priscilla '79

> On REAL PEOPLE they showed two women who were working on the docks doing loading. I'm sure they needed the job, but I think they were also proving a point.
>
> Debbie '80

> I think jobs like construction and firefighters should go to men. Some women are trying to prove they're as equal as men, but the jobs should go to the guy.
>
> Cynthia '81

According to these students, then, when men did women's work, they were denying or rejecting their masculinity, their natural claim to superiority. They were becoming effeminate. When women tried to do men's work, they were not accepting their natural limitations and subordination, but were trying to be as good as men, when in fact they were not.

The Process of Meaning Construction

Where do these meanings come from? What is the process of their construction?

My contention is that students constructed this particular set of meanings around office work out of their cultural experience of gender relations both in and out of school, and out of theirs and significant others' perceptions of and experiences with the occupational structure.

First of all, then, what are the students' experiences of gender relations that would lead them to construct these meanings for themselves as workers? The answers are already partly established in the data and partly contained in as yet unreported accounts of relationships within students' families and among peers.

In terms of their families, the students' parents basically portrayed a traditional sexual division of labor pattern in the home as well as at the work place. Many of the students had mothers, and sometimes older sisters, who had worked in offices. This work was often done on a part-time basis, or had been returned to once families had been raised. Mothers who did not work in offices tended to be employed as sales clerks or cafeteria workers. Fathers, on the other hand, generally had histories of full-time manual labor or civil service work; most of them were loading dock workers, mechanics, truck drivers, factory workers, or building custodians. A few students had fathers who were mail carriers or police officers; one father was a high school teacher, and one was listed as an industrial engineer although he had never been to college.

In a similar manner traditional sex roles were enacted in the home. Although, for example, three students mentioned fathers who cooked for the family, in no instance did the activity flow out of a basic role identity. In one case, the mother had suffered a mental breakdown and had been institutionalized. The father, thereafter, assumed the role of housekeeper. In another instance, the father started sharing the responsibility for cooking with his high school daughters after his wife died. In the third instance, the father had been retired for some time because of disability. Gourmet cooking had become a hobby for him.

The usual pattern, however, was the mother-as-homemaker. Not even a working mother and retired father guaranteed that the father would partake in routine housekeeping chores. In these cases, the running of the vacuum cleaner once a week seemed to vindicate the father, in his own eyes at least.

The cultural productions of the students at school often mirrored the gender codes they observed at home. Many of the senior girls, for instance, chose to take a child development class while the boys did not, even though the class was open to them and the teacher was a firm believer in the course for all would be parents.

In contrast to the female dominated child development class was the male dominated auto mechanics. Although a few girls enrolled in it each year, most chose to stay away or never even considered it. In explaining why she had not taken the course, Marion, a 1980 graduate, said to me.

> I would have liked an auto repair course even though I'm all thumbs. But it was all boys so I wouldn't have felt right.... Nobody would think you'd take mechanics unless you were loose. They don't look at it like you might need to know that stuff.

Contrastingly, the few boys who took cooking or child development were never described as loose. The one senior boy who took child development the year of my observation, for instance, was merely considered the class clown.

This same reluctance to put themselves in a position of being labelled on criteria related to sexual activity (or perceived sexual activity) prevented some of the girls from taking the traditional senior spring vacation in Florida. When I asked one of the COOP students, for example, why she was going to the Bahamas and not Florida over the spring break she answered that it was not any more expensive and, besides, girls who went to Florida tended to come back to school with a 'rep,' whether they had earned it or not. Again, the innuendos of 'having a rep' or 'being loose' never applied to boys.

The students also enacted traditional cultural forms of gender relations in the manner in which they participated in what Bernstein calls the expressive order of the school. This expressive order, often conveyed in school rituals like assemblies and extracurricular activities, "controls the transmission of the beliefs and moral system" and can be contrasted to the instrumental order of the school "which controls the transmission of facts, procedures and judgments involved in the acquisition of specific skills" (1975: 54-55).

A number of the COOP students had been or still were, at the time of the study, peppies, cheerleaders or pom-pom girls. As far as I know, none of them participated in these roles for girls sports; rather, they cheered for boys' basketball, swimming, wrestling, football or hockey. Being a member of one of these groups meant that on days of a pep rally or important game, the girls wore their uniforms, which usually consisted of a letter sweater, short cheerleading skirts and matching briefs. Even in sub-zero weather the girls would show support for boys' sports by baring their legs on their behalf.

Two of the students in the COOP class, Janie and Dana (an ex-model) were the co-captains of the pom-pom squad, and Maureen, a former football peppie, was nominated for the esteemed position of homecoming queen. Janie, who had started her COOP job with the State the summer before her senior year, had to alter her work schedule once school began to accommodate her pom-pom practices.

An incident that occurred one day as I walked with Janie through the mall highlights the accepted patterns of relations between Woodrow's boys and girls. Janie had cheered for the boys' swim team her junior year and those boys were quite friendly with her. On this particular day, one of the team members sneaked up on Janie from behind, "swept her off her feet" and ran through the mall with her. Janie screamed in surprise, then laughed, offering no sign of protest or displeasure.

This same supportive and submissive behavior was also present in out-of-school activities the students reported. Doris, for instance, light-heartedly complained to me about the "ass-pinching" treatment girls were subjected to at

a particular bar in town, but she, Nancy, Kris, and Josie continued to frequent it on a regular basis, never voicing objections to the 'offenders.' Terri admitted that she felt terrible if she scored higher than her boyfriend when they went bowling and sometimes deliberately threw the ball in the gutter. And Maureen said she often took her boyfriend's socks home to darn, although at the same time she was complaining about her mother's double standard regarding house chores for her and her brother.

The structure of gender relations at Woodrow can be clearly seen in two of the most important student assemblies that took place during the year. School assemblies are a form of ritual behavior which, as Bernstein says,

> involves a highly redundant form of communication in the sense that, given the social context, the messages are highly predictable. The messages themselves contain meanings which are highly condensed. Thus the major meanings in ritual are extraverbal or indirect; for they are not made verbally explicit. Ritual is a form of restricted code (1975: 62).

Bernstein described rituals as a means of social control which prevent "the questioning of the basis of the expressive culture and so are conditions for its effective transmission and reception" (1975: 56).

The interpretation is generally supported by both the phenomenological and anthropological literature. Working within the framework of Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality for example, Mechling (1981: 138) contends that "out of the natural dimorphism of sex, culture constructs gender -- whole symbolic orders of male/female that permeate everyday life." One of the ways in which this arbitrary construction is made to appear natural is through ritual dramatization which (as Mechling quotes Frank Young)

> is the communication strategy typically employed by solidarity groups in order to maintain their highly organized, but all the more vulnerable, definition of the situation (1981: 144).

Since the school assemblies reported here were prepared by students with little or no adult supervision, they should be regarded as representative of student culture rather than school ideology. These two assemblies were called TWIRP and SENIOR AUD. TWIRP is an acronym for The Woman is Reuqired to Pay (a variation of the Sadie Hawkins theme) and traditionally took place close to Valetine's Day. The SENIOR AUD was scheduled close to graduation and was one of the fun rituals enacted to celebrate graduation.

At the TWIRP AUD, a senior boy is traditionally crowned king in a conscious take-off of the homecoming queen crowning. This same type of role reversal also occurred during the SENIOR AUD, which seemed to be structured on the Academy Awards format. Awards were presented for various forms of notorious behavior with songs and skits interspersed for variety. The two main skits were performed by senior boys dressed as girls.

The first skit, a parody of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," was called "The Twelve Years of School." As the curtain went up, twelve boys stood with their backs tc the audience singing

> In my first year of schooling my father said to me,
> 'Don't.....

As they went through the twelve years, the boys turned around one by one, adding the specific line written for their year. Some of the don't were: pick your nose, suck your thumb, fight with boys, stuff your bra, lift your dress up, drink and drive, get pregnant. Audience laughter was loudest when the "7th grade girl" turned to face the audience stuffing kleenex in his bra; when the "11th grade girl" turned, displaying balloons (not too originally) stuffed in his shirt to form voluptuous breasts; and when the "12th grade girl" turned to reveal his pregnant appearance, created with the help of a pillow.

The second skit turned out to be an introduction to the "Most Sexy Pair of Legs" Award. The stage curtain was raised just high enough to reveal four pair of hairy, muscular legs that obviously belonged to football player-like anatomies. Each nominee offered some sex stereotyped movement like leg stroking or crossing as his number was called off for judgment. When the winner's number was called, he emerged from behind the curtain to accept his award in a tuxedo jacket and boxer shorts.

I would argue that the specific form of social control exercized in these rituals is that of men over women. By enacting a traditional gender code which identifies women primarily on the basis of their sexuality at the very moment of high school graduation, at the time when academic achievement and accomplishment is foremost, the senior boys (in ways probably not realized by them) assert their superiority and dominance by dramatizing what the girls' identity really is. The fact that the girls in the audience appeared to enjoy the humor in these skits as much as did they boys indicates that, although arbitrary and therefore always vulnerable, the dominant gender code still maintains a high degree of legitimacy amond Woodrow's student population.

The language used during these events evinced the same stratified structure of gender relations. Just minutes prior to the start of the SENIOR AUD, when the planning committee was finishing last minute details like microphone testing, a boy from the audience yelled to a girl on stage who could not be heard, "Well speak up, woman!" The Seventh Award at the SENIOR AUD was called the "Don Juan" or "Swinger" Award. In describing the award the male emcee said, "most guys like to <u>keep</u> a steady girl, but some of us don't." Somewhat surprisingly, this language, announcing ownership and possession, was not used solely by boys. Cindy, one of the COOP students, responded to a joking remark Mrs. Lewis made about dating with the remark, "I'm not interested. I'm <u>taken</u>."

Other occurrences during these assemblies also revealed the same dominant gender code. Boys and girls, except for a few steady couples, chose to segregate themselves in the audience. The boys tended to cluster in the back from where they would direct cat calls and wolf whistles to various girls on stage. These clusters of boys would also hoot and snicker at the singing of such popular romantic songs as "If" and "Close to You." The girls sitting in front of them would then turn around to shout "Oh, shut up" or "Grow Up"

and would show their appreciation of the duet on stage (and for a culture of romance) by giving them a long, loud, standing ovation.

So the combination of ritualized and everyday practices embodying the sexual division of labor and the bi-polarity of gender roles both at home and school confirmed and solidified the meaning of the students own personal wage labor indentities. Those processes which they were both observers of and participants in, guided them toward traditionally defined women's work, well before graduation from high school. The particular form of women's work they chose, however, (in this case clerical work) resulted from a quite sophisticated understanding of real job possibilities in the occupational structure.

The meaning office work carried for the students, its appropriateness for them as women, is embedded in the possibilities it holds out for employment. This is quite apparent in the preceding ethnographic description. Students are discouraged from considering occupations with limited openings such as teaching, and from considering occupations where the openings for women seem limited---such as management. In Donna's words "it seems like the men are the ones who are going to get the higher positions."

If office jobs continue to increase while manufacturing and professional jobs disappear, women will undoubtedly apply for office work in ever greater numbers. They can also be expected to internalize an ever stronger sexual division of labor ideology as competition among males increases for the few remaining industrial jobs. Woman's place will be regarded more strongly as somewhere that is not messy, greasy or dirty. A traditional culture of femininity wherein women are regarded as soft, clean and delicate creatures will probably intensify.

What this analysis clearly indicates is that the meaning of work, career ambitions, aspirations, and orientations are fundamentally misconceived when posited as individual level, psychological variables. Although certain dispositions and forms of consciousness ultimately reside within persons, although they ultimately shape meanings and identities, these characteristics do not initially emerge from the individual, but from the cultural context, itself formed (in Bourdieu's terminology) by an objective structure of job probabilities.

> Only by constructing the objective structures (price curves, chance of access to higher education, laws of the matrimonial market, etc.) is one able to pose the question of the mechanisms through which the relationship is established between the structures and the practices of the representations which accompany them, instead of treating these 'thought objects' as 'reasons' or 'motives' and making them the determining cause of the practices (Bourdieu, 1977: 21).

Objective structures, not the individual, give rise to particular common sense notions and cultural orientations from which job aspirations and work meanings emerge. These objective structures ultimately must be brought into the analysis in order to explain why certain jobs are considered reasonable or unreasonable, desirable or undesirable for particular groups, for it is the structures that establish for people a sense of what is possible, a sense of what is "reality" (Bourdieu, 1977: 164).

Conclusion

I have claimed that the utilization of a cultural reproduction theory has made two basic and related contributions to this analysis of "meaning making" among office education students. Those contributions are that it is particularly well-suited to an avoidance, on the one hand, of an individual-level, volunteeristic type of analysis wherein each person is basically unconstrained in the constitution of meaning-making and personal subjectivity, and, on the other hand, well-suited to an avoidance of a highly structural, deterministic view of the social construction of meaning. Let me briefly summarize each of these points.

Had this paper been limited to the first half, namely the reasons and non-reasons for students choosing the COOP program, it would have conveyed a highly distorted image of the choice process: one that was overly rational and articulable, rooted foremost and primarily in individual consciousness. What the second half of this paper revealed is that "variables" such as ambition, aspiration, and sex-role identification are not primarily psychological, but cultural and that culture has a strong basis in the opportunity structure. Perceptions of this structure are not primarily psychological blocks to achievement, they are real insights that provide the basis for cultural "accommodation strategies."

Conversely, had this paper started with the needs of the occupational structure, the expansion of the service sector, the increased demands for and ideological level in recruiting and training students for those jobs, it would have conveyed an overly deterministic view of social process, one in which individuals merely respond to the needs of objective structures. In this case, for instance, students would be seen as entering the COOP program as a purely rational response to job openings in office occupations.

What the infusion of a cultural perspective does in this analysis is to more properly contextualize the process of meaning-making and to illuminate some of the spaces within the social system viewed as a structured totality--in this case spaces between the individual, the instrumental and expressive orders of the school, the culture of peer groups and families, and the needs of the economy in order to demonstrate both how social reproduction occurs and where transformation processes could possibly occur.

Since there is a profound homology among the structures and practices that encode proper gender relations, it is not surprising that the COOP students accept and reproduce the meaning of traditional sex roles in their vocational choice. But, in addition, what my data clearly indicate is that a primary mechanism in the reproduction of a cultural form (even a subordinate culture) is the benefit a group derives from reproducing it. A traditional culture of femininity is not irrational; it is an adaptation or accommodation (albeit unconscious) to the perceived structural limitations of their lives; it is a choice of the best alternatives thought to be available.

Given the scarcity of professional-level or interesting career-type jobs and the difficulty of handling such a job along with home/family responsibilities, the emphasis the COOP students placed on a traditional feminine code exhibited a certain amount of good sense. Reproducing a traditional culture of femininity can even be interpreted as a way of escaping the tedious demands of wage labor and of denying it power over the self.

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